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Viewing cable 09SANAA2185, WHO ARE THE HOUTHIS, PART ONE: WHAT ARE THEY

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
09SANAA2185	2009-12-09 13:16	2011-08-30 01:44	SECRET//NOFORN	Embassy Sanaa

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SUBJECT: WHO ARE THE HOUTHIS, PART ONE: WHAT ARE THEY
FIGHTING FOR?

REF: A. SANAA 2117
[1](#)B. SANAA 1939

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (S/NF) SUMMARY. Given the Houthis' opacity and the government's exaggerated claims about their goals, it is difficult to know what exactly they are fighting for. The ROYG accuses the Houthis of wanting to restore clerical rule in Yemen, which they deny, insisting instead that they want basic citizenship rights and religious freedoms. Although some Yemeni analysts believe the Houthis' goals may be broader, possibly including political control of Sa'ada governorate, most informed observers do not believe that the Houthis desire to re-establish the imamate or expand their control beyond Sa'ada. In November 2009, the Houthis presented President Saleh with a list of conditions for guaranteeing a final resolution to the conflict. These include reconstruction and compensation for war-time damage and looting, genuine economic development and delivery of basic services, and an end to cultural and political discrimination against Zaydis, who form the majority of Sa'ada governorate's population. The Houthis, feeling that Zaydi Shi'ism is under threat from the growing influence of Sunni Salafism, also reportedly seek to establish their own madrasas (religious schools) and a university for Zaydi jurisprudence in order to preserve their unique identity, religious beliefs, and practices. Understanding the Houthis' objectives can help shape a political solution to this complex conflict, though additional factors, such as tribal vendettas, will also need to be taken into account in order to bring the fighting to an end. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (SBU) The information in this cable is compiled from PolOff interviews with sources who have first-hand contact with the Houthis, including journalists, relief workers, ROYG officials, and Houthi mediator and Haq party chief Hassan Zaid. (Note: It is Post's policy not to communicate directly with the Houthis due to ROYG sensitivity. End Note.)

WHAT DO THEY WANT?

[1](#)3. (S/NF) Given the opacity of the Houthi rebels in the northern governorate of Sa'ada, as well as the government's misleading claims about the group's goals, it is difficult to answer the question, "What are the Houthis fighting for?" They are rhetorically anti-American, painting the slogan "Death to America" on buildings and boulders throughout Sa'ada governorate, but they have not targeted U.S. citizens or interests. The Houthis are also anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic, and their threats against the Jewish community in Sa'ada (one of only two remaining Jewish communities in Yemen) caused the Jews to relocate to Sana'a in 2007.

EVOLVING OBJECTIVES

[1](#)4. (SBU) The Houthis' objectives have evolved since the first Sa'ada war began in June 2004, when the Houthis were a

small group of fighters defending a member of their family, MP Hussein al-Houthi, from arrest. (Note: Hussein al-Houthi was reportedly one of 21 brothers, including current leaders Abdul-Malik and Yahya. End Note.) For almost three months Houthi and his supporters, who at that time claimed allegiance to the state, fought off government troops from his stronghold in the Marran Mountains, until he was killed on September 10, 2004. In the years since, as the Houthis have gained supporters and territories, the group's objectives have expanded while becoming even murkier. According to the International Crisis Group, there is no evidence of a coherent ideology or political program: "Some groups fighting the government, though referred to as Houthis, appear motivated by multiple, mostly non-ideological factors having little in common with the leadership's proclaimed grievances." These factors include disenfranchisement with the ROYG and the need to avenge the killings of family members or tribesmen unless blood money is paid.

ROYG ACCUSATIONS ABOUT HOUTHI GOALS

15. (S/NF) The ROYG accuses the Houthis of wanting to restore the clerical rule of the imamate overthrown in 1962 and

impose draconian religious beliefs and practices on communities where they are in power. Foreign Minister Abu-Bakr al-Qirbi said in an interview published in London-based Al-Sharq al-Awsat on September 12 that the Houthis "consider the current presidential system illegal and not in accordance with their creed." Colonel Akram al-Qassmi of the National Security Bureau (NSB) told PolOffs on November 18 that re-establishing the imamate is not the Houthis' main priority now, but it is part of their ideology.

Instead, they are currently focusing on "standing up and strengthening" a Shi'a-dominated region along the Saudi-Yemeni border. "With this deck of cards, the Houthis can abuse the Saudi and Yemeni governments," he said, much like Hizballah in Lebanon. The ROYG - along with many Arab governments in the region - seeks to portray the Houthis as part of a regional, Iran-led Shi'ite conspiracy to expand influence and power at the expense of Sunni populations.

16. (S/NF) The Houthis deny such goals, however, and as a result, many of the Houthis' pronouncements are more about what they do not stand for than what they do. The Houthis proclaimed on their website, "The authority's accusations about the imamate are just a media war... We are not asking for positions, we are asking for rights and justice. The essence of the crisis is political." In a letter delivered to President Saleh on November 22, Houthi spokesman Mohammed Abdulsalam attempted to correct the record, saying, "We hope that you do not (believe) the propaganda presented to you that we want to restore the imamate or that we have anything against the republican system." He goes on to explain, "We do not want from you more than the right of equal citizenship." In the letter, Abdulsalam attributed the misunderstanding and marginalization of the Houthis to "the persistence of the official media to deal with us as if we are from another planet."

BASIC CITIZENSHIP RIGHTS OR BROADER AMBITIONS?

17. (S/NF) Houthi mediator Hassan Zaid, a Zaydi Hashemite from a prominent Sana'a family and chair of the Haqq party, the legitimate political arm of the Zaydi movement, told PolOff on November 21 that the Houthis are fighting in self-defense and will stop as soon as the ROYG ceases to attack them. He explained that the Houthis' political goal is to "benefit from the protection of the Constitution and the laws," including equal citizenship and freedom of expression and religion. Mohammed al-Qadhi, correspondent for Dubai-based The National, however, told PolOff that the Houthis' goals may be broader than securing certain religious and political freedoms. The Houthis' fight is "no longer about self-defense," he said. "They may have their own

political ambitions now." He believes that their fight is partially motivated by outrage at the open secret that President Saleh is grooming his son Ahmed Ali for the presidency. According to Qadhi, Saleh "keeps singing a song that offends them," referring to how the ROYG prides itself on having "toppled the hereditary rule of the imamate" but is "doing the same thing (hereditary rule) under the umbrella of the republic."

18. (C) Nabil al-Soufi of NewsYemen, who twice traveled secretly to Sa'ada governorate, told PolOff on November 18, "The Houthis have a political agenda, but the war they are waging lacks clear objectives." He explained that the Houthis were dragged into the sixth war and have to keep fighting to defend themselves. He believes their objective is to control Sa'ada governorate, not to spread Zaydi religious beliefs or to re-establish the imamate, although they use religious rhetoric to advance their political objectives. U.S. academic Greg Johnsen, who has studied Yemeni politics for many years, has written, "Despite the religious rhetoric on all sides, the Houthis are primarily a group driven by the local politics of Sa'ada." Chief among their complaints is the ROYG's "deliberate neglect" of the governorate and the traditional political elite's place within it. The conflict also is believed to have originated as an inter-Zaydi battle of the social classes, as the Hashemite elite within the Zaydi sect felt excluded from their rightful place in government by Zaydis from lower social classes, such as Saleh.

HOUTHIS' SPECIFIC DEMANDS

19. (S/NF) The Houthis have presented President Saleh with a list of their conditions for "guaranteeing a final resolution" to the conflict (ref a). In addition to releasing prisoners (including 18 members of the Houthi family who are in prison in Sana'a, according to Zaid), compensating civilians for looted property, and reconstructing war-damaged infrastructure, the Houthis demand the "normalization" and "demilitarization" of life in Sa'ada through the following steps: 1) the army's withdrawal from villages and farms in order to demilitarize public and private properties in Sa'ada; 2) genuine economic development and delivery of basic services; 3) end cultural and political discrimination against the Zaydi population; and 4) allow civil servants to return to their jobs and give them back-pay for the time they were separated from their posts. According to NDI Deputy Director Murad Zafir, the Houthis are also seeking to establish a university for Zaydi jurisprudence, as various universities for Sunni jurisprudence already exist in Yemen.

WAR WITH RELIGIOUS ROOTS OR RELIGIOUS WAR?

10. (SBU) One of the deepest root causes of the conflict in Sa'ada is religious. Over the past 20 years, Zaydis -) who have historically made up the majority of the governorate's population -) have felt increasingly threatened by the radical Sunni Salafism exported from Saudi Arabia (ref b). "Sa'ada is so Shi'a that even the stone is Shi'a," Abdulkader al-Hillal, former head of the Sa'ada Mediation Committee, told the Ambassador, quoting a Yemeni poet. However, Sa'ada's unique Zaydi identity has been challenged by the establishment of Salafi schools and mosques in the governorate, and local residents founded a Zaydi revivalist group called the Believing Youth to teach young people about their Zaydi religion and history. A branch of the Believing Youth later produced the more extreme Houthi ideology and organization. NDI's Zafir told PolOff on November 21 that the Houthis are fighting to preserve their unique identity, religious beliefs and practices by seeking to establish their own schools and university.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) Contrary to the ROYG's claims, the Houthis do not appear to be fighting to restore clerical rule. It is more likely that they are, as they claim, seeking greater local autonomy and respect for their religious beliefs and practices. Understanding the Houthis' objectives can help shape a political solution to this complex conflict. Yet even if such a settlement takes the Houthi leadership's grievances into account, the fighting will not end unless steps are taken to address the additional factors)- such as tribal vendettas -- that have motivated other individuals and tribes to join the Houthis' struggle despite not sharing their ideology. END COMMENT.
SECHE